

An Ancient Craft

Carved from a chosen redwood tree, this is a contemporary example of a traditional Tolowa river craft. Skilled carvers have passed this artful custom down through many generations, though builders now use power tools to hew the dugout canoes.

In earlier times, Tolowa canoe makers split the log, then worked it down from the outside (sapwood) in, thus preserving the stronger heartwood for the hull of the canoe. They carved and worked the wood with hand tools such as bone and stone adzes, mauls, and elk antler wedges until the sturdy, well-balanced canoe sat lightly and gracefully on the water. Dugout redwood crafts were once used by Tolowa tribesmen to travel, hunt, and trade along the Smith River.



Under the guidance of tribal elder Sam Lopez, Tolowan woodworker Emery Mattz shapes the interior of the canoe seen here.

Features inside the canoe represent kidneys, heart, lungs, and nose, signifying the relationships of humans, nature, and spirit.

